Taming the Paper Tiger of Tehran

We may be in the end game now. Rumors swirl of potential nuclear deals, as pressure on Iran is steadily ratcheted up by previously ambivalent participants. One hopes for a happy outcome. If past is prologue, however, the world is in for more of the same from Tehran: feints of compromise followed by recalcitrance, all the while allowing Iran to proceed with its objectives unhindered. The time for decision, however, may prove to be close. The International Atomic Energy Agency is sounding alarms that Iran is dissembling about its nuclear weapons programs. The European Union which, after years of fruitless negotiations that have enabled the steady progress of Tehran's nuclear ambitions, is giving indications that the policy of engagement is at risk of failing. Only a fool would gainsay the Iranian regime's own protestations that it intends to pursue the uranium enrichment program that will give it the capability to develop nuclear weapons. And yet, the world allows the process to play itself out, content to pretend it is confronting the problem through negotiations that go nowhere and sanctions that remain a nuisance to Iran, but little more than that.

Israel, the object of Iranian's vilification and existential threats the likes of which no other country in the world is subjected, watches eagerly for signs of international resolve. Having learned from the Nazi experience that a state which threatens to annihilate six million (more) Jews may not merely be posturing, Israelis are resigned to go it alone if necessary. Having been faced with other mortal dangers, in 1967 as well as that which was posed by Saddam Hussein's nuclear program, they also know from historical experience that, if they are left on their own to deal with their own survival, the decision to act will be harrowing, it may indeed be criticized, but more than that…it will be unavoidable. Reassuring as it might be that at least one Democratic presidential candidate (who has since been beaten for the nomination) expressed a willingness to ''obliterate'' Iran if it launched a nuclear attack on Israel, such fidelity, if indeed the threat were carried out, would still be small comfort to the millions of Israelis dead or dying from radiation sickness.

Make no mistake about it: there will be blood…or, to be accurate, more blood. Already Iran has drawn American blood through arming and directing attacks by Shia militias in Iraq, attacks which have killed and maimed many Coalition forces and countless Iraqi civilians. So too have they worked to undermine other Arab countries through violence, including Lebanon. The Shia Persian-dominated regime in Tehran is indeed intent on pursuing regional domination at the expense of the

Sunni Arabs. Israel's Jews, whom they genuinely regard as loathsome, are an obstacle to that agenda, and are being dealt with accordingly. The arming of Hezbollah and Hamas is not merely meant to create a counterweight to inhibit an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. It is meant to maintain a relentless pressure on Israelis that will inhibit immigration into Israel and, by ultimately making the country unlivable, render the Zionist experiment suspect. Left unhindered, they may well accomplish this goal.

The implications of Iran's agenda are often misperceived, not only by outsiders but by Middle Easterners, Jew and Arab, alike. Thus everyone bemoans the lack of resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Yet, at this point, the greatest obstacle to peace between Israel and the Arabs is the spoiler role being played by Iran. Without the imminent fear of Hamas and Islamic Jihad terrorism against its people, Israel would have long ago relaxed the stranglehold on the West Bank that clearly has helped to undermine the already fragile position of Mahmoud Abbas and those Palestinians who might be willing to settle for a Grand Bargain with Israel. Much is known of how this settlement would look. In all likelihood, it would resemble the deal worked out by Ehud Barak and Yassir Arafat prior to Ariel Sharon's ascension. Ironically, Sharon's ultimate policies and Prime Minister Olmert's election platform were leading to much a similar outcome, albeit executed unilaterally. Indeed, the major impediment to Israel engaging with the Arab League Peace Plan which was initiated by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, and which incorporates most of the features of the Grand Bargain, is the veto which is wielded by Hamas' capability to orchestrate violence. Yet even they are only partially masters of their own destiny. Hamas' paymasters and maximalist mentors in Iran have called the shots with a brutal clarity of purpose. Any Arabs leaders who did not believe this to be the case were rudely disabused of their prejudice when Hamas seized control of Gaza.

A good case could be made that Arab leaders are more sensitive to Israel's legitimate security needs than ever before. They hold no illusions about the dual threat posed by Hezbollah not only to Israel, but also to their own governance of Lebanon. After all, the latest flexing of Nasrallah's muscles in West Beirut were met with squeals of displeasure aimed at Tehran not from Israel but from the Saudi Foreign Minister. It is no secret that Sunni Arab leaders held Hezbollah, Syria and Iran responsible for the out break of war that followed the kidnapping of Israeli soldiers along Israel's northern border in the Summer of 2006, and savored the prospect of Israel inflicting a crushing blow on Nasrallah's Shiite militia. So too did the G-8, which

went out of its way to pin blame on Hezbollah and its handlers in Damascus and Tehran, and thus tried to buy time for Israel achieving its war aims. Much to the world's dismay, Israeli political and military ineptitude and miscalculations allowed Hezbollah to escape anything approaching a mortal blow. To the contrary: as Israel's civilian population was subjected to the boldest and most far-reaching attacks in five decades by Hezbollah rockets, so many previously sacrosanct "red lines'' were crossed that the deterrent power on which Israel ultimately relies for its survival in the region was shaken dramatically. The concept that missiles could rain down on Haifa and that Damascus could go unscathed had never occurred to Israel's enemies before.

Having seen their clients score a "Divine Victory'', Tehran's strategists applied the wonderful Leninist dictum which exhorts Thrust with a bayonet; if you encounter mush, proceed. If you encounter steel, withdraw". It should not have come as a surprise that the momentum of success in Lebanon should be followed by the putsch in Gaza. Again, had Israel intervened successfully against Hamas, there would have been a sigh of relief in Arab capitals. The sight of 20 Hamas strongmen literally hurling Fatah loyalists off rooftops, or shooting them through the knees, was image enough to have justified a regime change. One might argue whether the reoccupation of Gaza would have been the right strategy. The subsequent bombardment of Israeli towns by Hamas that followed, including in time the city of Ashkelon, suggests that the result of allowing the militants' arms build-up may prove to be eerily reminiscent of the threat which ultimately emanated from Lebanon. Reports of Iranian and Hezbollah involvement in Gaza indicate a new level of integration.

The cry of ''appeasement'' is often exaggerated; moreover, like patriotism, its overuse lends itself to be purloined by scoundrels. Regrettably, however, in some cases its characterization of an era is most apt. The last several years have been such a period. As historians are now well aware that Hitler's General Staff never expected his remilitarization of the Rhineland to go unanswered, a pattern of inaction by the allies that was to be repeated as the Fuehrer pushed his luck with one adventure, so too are we seeing a pattern of appeasement emerge in the region. Having felt no real steel to parry their thrusts, the result is that Iran has been emboldened into over-confidence. Subjected to encirclement, and beset by a regional agenda that is not so much determined by its immediate neighbors but by Tehran, the only regional power that can act as a counter-point, Israel, has been caught by surprise. It sees itself trying to decide between making a very flimsy peace with its remaining Arab enemies or circling the wagons in

the inchoate hope that something better may come along. It will not. If there is to be any hope of peace with the Arabs, Israel and its supporters will need to confront Iran. The alternative is a debilitating war of attrition which Israel cannot win. Between demographic advantages, the revitalization of the their finances and,concomitantly, the resources which can be applied to purchasing the world's most advanced weapons systems, Israel's regional rivals are steadily eroding the strategic edge on which Israel must depend for its survival.

With Iranian momentum and bravado quite successfully giving an impression that the Almighty is on their side, conventional wisdom suggests Israel cannot win this fight. So let's look at the ''correlation of forces''. If psychological warfare is a gauge, Iran appears to be on the march. Flush with oil revenue and gains in Lebanon, Gaza and, truth be told, Iraq, the regime is understandably quite confident these days. Other than a series of bold strokes of late by the Mossad , the myth of Israeli savvy and invincibility has been shattered, undermined all the more so by corruption scandals which feed the perception that the country is morally bankrupt as well as ''on the run''. The Sunni regimes too are under duress: Egypt is petrified that the fundamentalist experiment in Gaza will spread across its already porous frontiers and spark the latent virus of indigenous Islamist extremism that not only led to the assassination of President Mubarak's predecessor, Anwar Sadat, but presented the greatest threat to his own rule and personal survival as well. Amidst the uncertainty of Mubarak's own succession, the Arab world's most populous state now has to contend with a resurgent Iran. Israel, which perhaps shortsightedly has assumed that it could fob off the Gaza cancer onto Egypt, may well rue the day it allowed Hamas to undermine the one neighbor with whom the absence of peace would represent an existential threat equal to or greater than Tehran's. Saudi Arabia, having managed ruthlessly to stay ahead of Al Queda within its own borders, is keenly aware that Iran represents the major threat to a Saudi policy that is – as it has always been – geared towards maintaining stability. Like Israel, which is the region's most prosperous state save the Gulf Arabs, the satisfied powers want little more out of politics than to be able to get about their business of developing and selling technology (in Israel's case) or exporting oil (in the case of the Gulf producers) so that they can build their countries and enjoy their prosperity.

This is where Iran comes in. Unlike Israel or the Gulf states, Iran is not a satisfied power. It imagines a new Shia reality with Lebanon progressively within its grasp and Iraq a long-term project in which victory is more than likely. Although Arab, it is likely that the persecution complex

Iraqi Shias share with their Persian co-religionists will result in a greater alignment over time. While Arab mergers of bygone years were always preordained to failure amidst farcical recrimination, a Shia merger might well work. Persians, who invented chess after all, are used to the long game and have a history of empire-building that is as long as it is enviably vibrant to this day. More than that, Iran is enjoying the oil windfall that has managed to rescue many other ill-managed states these past few years. So it is flush with victory, cash, and the heady conviction that God is on their side. This is a pretty lethal combination.

But, and here is the rub, Iran is, to use Mao's term, a Paper Tiger. While Israel and the Arabs tremble at Iran's rhetoric and apparent strategic reach, in truth Iran is far weaker than its adversaries and has managed to play a modest hand with a skill that would make any seasoned poker player blush with envy. Despite its bluster, the regime is vulnerable politically, economically and militarily. It is in far greater risk of being undermined and indeed overthrown than any of its enemies…and it is perhaps time that its enemies now understand their power as the ''end game'' take shape.

From a political standpoint, having stifled genuine reformism in the political system, the Iranian regime could rightly be called authoritarian. While technically there is pluralism of a sort, it's no more genuine than that which is found in today's Russia and far less rooted in popularity. The organs of state promulgate a façade of democracy, but without the institutional substance that would make it real. On the premise that a state that rules its people through intimidation and force is fundamentally weaker than one in which the sovereignty is popular, Iran is weaker than some of its enemies. Certainly this would apply to Israel, but it is likely to apply perhaps to a number of the Sunni monarchies as well, as they have delivered a measure of prosperity to their people that the mullahs have not. The fact that the Iranian standard of living still has not recovered to that which prevailed under the Shah's regime several decades ago represents more than a theological gray area…but a point of potential internal conflict. Recent rioting which accompanied the raising of petrol prices highlight the thin ice on which the regime treads.

Many Iranians understand the box in which they find themselves. Recent quelling of criticism of Ahmedinejad's policies on the one hand, and the corruption of the president's domestic rivals amongst the most powerful mullahs on the other, have highlighted internal power struggles. This spectacle must be as curious to many Iranians as it is for international observers who have, only since Ahmedinejad's

ascension, come to realize in earnest the danger posed by the regime. Where once it was posited that Iran should have as much right to a bomb as India or Pakistan, the more malevolent and deeply threatening nature of Iran's foreign policy has quieted such moral relativism. For this tender mercy, we should all be grateful. Voltaire once wrote that ''if God did not exist, one would have to invent him''. Extending the metaphor further, one could rightly say the same for Iran's president. Like the gift that keeps on giving, he has exposed for all to see the true nature of a regime that is as ostentatiously obnoxious as it had once been cynically discretely.

Superimpose onto the inherent vulnerabilities of an oppressive government the fact that Iran is one of the world's last remaining imperial states and the regime's susceptibility to reason may become more acute. Iran is governed by the dominant Persian population, which comprises less than half the population. The remaining minorities (Arabs, Kurds, Azeris, Ahwaz, Baluchis) are a source of concern for the regime, and have the capability to be highly restive if they perceive central authority to be weakened. Tehran understands this very well,even if they do not highlight the fact.

Playing therefore to Iran's weaknesses, what should the strategy be? If it is not already being done, the vulnerability of Iran's leaders should be leveraged with a quiet ultimatum. The gist of this demarche would be as follows: we understand that you have played a great game until now. But it is time to take the offer which has been presented to you by Javier Solana and the Europeans, its financial terms tweaked to provide for a face-saving means for Tehran to declare its own victory. The consequences of not accepting this package of incentives would be an explicit threat to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities, or suborn Israel's attempts to do so. Whereas Tehran would be advised that their not expanding the war would allow them to continue to pump oil, the regime would be told that any attempt to broaden the war to hit at Americans in Iraq, or its Arab or Israeli allies, or to attempt to hold hostage the free transit of oil through the Straits of Hormuz, would be met with counterblows against Iranian economic targets that would shut down Iran's oil exports as well. To those observers who have been weaned on Iranian propaganda that they control the world's destiny by controlling the region's oil, this might seem a hollow threat. It is not.

For what action is it that could cause Iran to be brought to its knees? The answer is brutally simple: cut off the oil revenues. If the central government were to lose its one source of income, the regime would be subjected to severe stress and, very possibly, collapse. Without revenue there could be no subsidies and patronage and the economic

foundation of Persian power – already tenuous even with windfall profits - would evaporate. This would not be unprecedented in Iran's modern history. Even the Shah recognized that any hopes of riding out the revolution were mere wishful thinking once the oil workers put down their tools.

The point should be made that, whereas the entire Gulf region depends on oil revenues for their livelihoods, only Iran depends on them for their survival. Very simply, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States do not share Iran's vulnerability in equal measure. Should Iran retaliate to an attack with a retaliatory strike on their oil facilities, the Arabs would be hurt…but not fatally crippled. The ability to draw on well over a trillion dollars of reserves would more than see them through the crisis. This is a luxury that Iran, with its much larger population, does not enjoy. Even Ahmedinejad's kindred spirit in Venezuela would not be able to rescue an economy that has little other than some pistachio nuts and carpets to compensate. The Iranians are not stupid and would have to think twice about throwing the dice with their very survival by lashing out at their neighbors' oil infrastructure.

Other than the difficulty of achieving a decisive blow to the facilities themselves, there are two main objections which are raised against an attack on Iran's nuclear sites: the fear of Iranian retaliation and its impact on the global economy; and the negative impact of an external attack on the domestic political scene within Iran itself. Unfortunately, should the decision be made that Iran is near the tipping point, beyond which their march to their nuclear potential will be unstoppable, these once legitimate dilemmas will no longer outweigh the unacceptable danger of allowing the world's most deliberate state sponsor of terrorism to obtain a nuclear umbrella for itself and its allies. Even if oil were to spike further, the specter of economic dislocation cannot be allowed to undermine the resolve required to prevent a nation which threatens its neighbors to have the means to eliminate them. To those who would wring their hands over higher oil prices, or to those who would easily chant 'no blood for oil', the chorus must not be allowed to be 'only Lebanese or Iraqi or Jewish blood for oil'. The free (and oil dependent) world which would suffer most from this state of affairs has, unfortunately, had a long time to resolve this matter. If the consequences are now potentially more painful than they would have been when oil was cheaper, this is the natural consequence of procrastination. As to the second oft-raised objection, that an attack of any kind on Iran would undermine the in-country opposition, this argument is not sufficient to offset the bigger threat posed by Iran acquiring nuclear weapons. Moreover, it is probably spurious. One day, the regime will fall of its own internal contradictions.

And one day perhaps Iran will emerge as a very constructive player on the world stage. But, at this particular juncture, one has to deal with Iran the way it is, and not as we would like to imagine it to be. It is probably true to say that genuine elections, with all that entails (freedom of speech, the press, the judiciary) would lead to a removal of the present theocracy, but what chance are Iran's repressed democrats to have if the regime is emboldened by a nuclear umbrella that would make it even more impervious to moral suasion than it is now? Bestowing omnipotence on the regime will not be helping Iranians, any more than it will Iran's neighbors.

What then of Israel's ability to withstand a barrage of Iranian missiles that could follow an attack on Iran's nuclear sites? Should it happen, absorbing the counter-attack would be painful, the damage would be horrific…and Israel would survive. Being a democracy, it is better positioned to cope with the consequences of a decision about which there is a broad consensus. Being an economy based not on natural resources, but the intellectual prowess of its citizens, its resilience would likely be astonishing. And with Iran tamed, it is likely that the steadily debilitating effects of the fear of Iranian-inspired confrontation on its northern, eastern and southern borders would lead to a renaissance from which it would emerge stronger.

To those who would see this line of reasoning to be wishful thinking, they are asked to look at it from the opposite point of view. What real choice is there? Hashem Rafsanjani, a previous President of Iran, once provided a glimpse into the regime's mindset that was most revealing, if more elegantly expressed than Ahmedinejad's crude threats. He was quoted as noting that whereas Israel would be effectively neutralized as a state with one nuclear bomb dropped on Tel Aviv, Iran could withstand the counter-attack and still survive. As he put it, this is something to think about. Many of us have, and find the prospect of war in any form chilling. But if it is to be, let it be while Iran can only use conventional weapons and not the nuclear weapons from which there would no prospect of the Middle East surviving as a region in which it is worth living, for Arab, Jew and even Persian.